8: Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933) 1941 NO6 Comanche NO6

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

THE COMANCHE SUN DANCE AND MESSIANIC OUTBREAK OF 1873

114 A confirmation of the Comanche Sun Dance[1] occurs incidentally in the valuable
668 historical work of Professor R. N. Richardson.[2] Richardson does not treat of the Sun
796 Dance itself, but he has produced some important cultural data that deserve to be called to the attention of anthropologists.

The recent work of Spier on the Prophet Dance of the Northwest[3] has established the cultural matrix of the several messianic cults of western North America in a number of deep-lying and apparently ancient, indigenous traits. The Comanches can also be fitted into this picture.

668 It is an hitherto unrealized fact that the Comanches in 1873 had their own short-
182 lived messianic outbreak. It is particularly notable that they did not use the cere-
535 monial form of the then current Prophet Dance (with which they most likely had
796 no direct contact). It was the Sun Dance which was adopted as the ceremonial vehicle! The Sun Dance was a wholly new feature in Comanche culture, devoid of associations which tied it too closely to other religious ends; and it possessed the elements of ritualized supernaturalism and the novel and spectacular which seem to be so important in messianic revivalism.

668 Richardson's fully documented account, which is derived from the official communications of observers who were in the field at the time,[4] reveals the following essential facts (corroborated at some points by the field notes taken by the Santa Fe Laboratory of Anthropology Ethnology Field Study Group, 1933):

a) "When conditions were already alarming (i.e., unrest on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation), the Comanches conceived the idea of holding a tribal medicine dance similar to the annual ceremonies of the Kiowas. This was a new thing for the Comanches."[5]

668 b) This idea was promulgated by the famous young medicine man and warrior,
792 Isatai, whose prestige was based upon a number of powers. He had established his invulnerability to bullets (which was common enough), and he had "raised the dead." But more important were his successful predictions that the comet which was attracting much attention at the time would disappear within five days and that it would be followed by a summer-long drought. According to the reports, he had also "ascended above the clouds, where he had communed with the Great Spirit."[6]

113 [1] Cf., R. Linton, *The Comanche Sun Dance* (American Anthropologist, Vol. 37, 1935), pp. 420–428.

[2] R. N. Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement* (Glendale, Cal., 1933), pp. 373 ff.

[3] L. Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives* (General Series in Anthropology, No. 1, 1935).

[4] F. W. Smith and J. W. Smith to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Sept. 26, 1874, Central Superintendency, S 1328; Haworth to Beede, April 25, 1874; Haworth to Hoag, May 6, 1874.

[5] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 372. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

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8: Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933) 1941 NO6 Comanche NO6

c) After Iʂatai had issued the call for the Sun Dance "which was widely heralded, and when the tribesmen assembled in May at a point on Red river near the agency boundary, every band was represented, several of them by almost one hundred percent of their people. . . . The great chiefs of the past had never been able to bring the scattered threads of the tribe together, but now a youthful warrior was about to accomplish that."[7]

d) The doctrine which Iʂatai preached was as follows:

a') The Caddoes, Wichitas and other tribes which had settled into reservation life were "going down hill fast" in numbers and well-being.

b') This was the fate in store for the Comanches if they heeded to the demands of the government.

c') But if they would turn to the war path and annihilate the Whites, then they would again become powerful and prosperous.

d') With his supernatural power he was empowered to cover all the warriors with immunity to bullets, and so he could guarantee the success of the venture against the Whites.[8]

e) Because of the violent tenor which the councils took, the pinəteka (Swift Stingers) band of Texas Comanches and a few other smaller groups withdrew and departed for home.

f) When the Sun Dance was finished he led a great war party of Comanches, accompanied by some Kiowas and Southern Cheyenes, south into Texas to wipe out the buffalo hunters who had their headquarters at Adobe Walls. There they came up against the new large caliber, long-range buffalo guns with which the professional buffalo hunters were equipped. The effect was disconcerting and disastrous. Iʂatai was discredited, and though he did not receive the horse-whipping that some of the warriors threatened, his influence as a prophet and leader was ended.[9]

g) But the fire Iʂatai had set was not yet burned out. Throughout that summer and the next year scores of murderous attacks were made upon white travelers and settlements throughout the southern plains. The result was to provoke determined military action and the abandonment of the Quaker Policy in Indian Affairs on the part of the United States. By 1875 the Comanches were militarily crushed, and that year "marks the end of their influence as a frontier factor of significance."[10]

So ended the Comanche experience with militant messianism in 1873–74.

In conclusion, attention may be called to the significance of these data for the question of North American prophet cults. Wallis[11] has summarized the materials which demonstrate a general and long-standing tendency to messianic attempts in this part of the aboriginal world. Spier, in proving the roots of the Ghost Dance in the Prophet Dance complex of the northwestern tribes, has laid stress upon the indigenous nature of regeneration of the dead in the cultures of that area.[12] The

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 374. [8] Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes*, unpublished.

[9] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 376. Also, Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes.*

[10] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

[11] W. D. Wallis, *Messiahs: Christian and Pagan* (Boston, 1918), Chap. V.

[12] Spier, *op. cit., in toto.*

8: Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933) 1941 NO6 Comanche NO6

Comanches, who stem from the northern Shoshones, not uncommonly experienced the return from the spirit world on the part of those who had died. It may be said of the Comanches that they had all the basic cultural materials for the prophet cult, such as Spier describes, except the dance form. And they used the Sun Dance to fill this need.

The crisis situation which Kroeber,[13] Lowie,[14] Wallis,[15] and Lesser[16] have emphasized as essential to the emergence of Plains messianism had arisen in the southern plains long before 1890. It may well have been that a Ghost Dance could have swept northward from the Comanches in 1873 had not their initial effort ended in such utter disaster.

As is well known, Professor Kroeber has laid the indifference of the California tribes to the great movement of 1890 to "immunization" by their previous experience in the 1870's.[17] This thesis aptly applies to the Comanches, who were coldly indifferent to the Ghost Dance which raged through the Plains at the end of the century. The sole Comanches to take up that dance were a few northerners who were in close contact with their dancing neighbors, and the Swift Stingers band—the one Comanche band which had refused to participate in the outbreak of 1873.[18] Mooney's explanation, which laid the Comanche rejection of the Ghost Dance to a "general skeptical temperament of the Comanches" and to a "tribal pride against borrowing from others, as they considered their own mescal rite sufficient,"[19] must now be discarded in its entirety.

E. Adamson Hoebel

University of California

THE SOUTHERN UTE PEYOTE CULT

In his article on *The Character and History of the Southern Ute Peyote Rite*,[1] Dr Marvin K. Opler presents a description of the cult and an interpretation of the conditions relating to its acceptance which warrant further discussion. In January, 1938, I spent a week with peyotists on the Ute Mountain reservation at Towaoc, Colorado, in circumstances ideal for learning about peyotism.[2] Several coincidences contributed to my being favorably received: at Blanding, Utah, on my way to Colorado, I had been instrumental in having two Towaoc peyotists released from jail, where they

[13] A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78, 1925).

[14] R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (New York, 1924), pp. 193–195.

[15] Wallis, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–149.

[16] A. Lesser, *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game* (Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, xvi, 1933), p. 59. [17] Kroeber, *op. cit.*, pp. 868–869.

[18] James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Report 14, 1896), pp. 901–902. [19] *Ibid.*

[1] (American Anthropologist, 42, 1940), pp. 463–478.

[2] Incidental to a Culture Element Distribution Survey under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

[pp 304-end, not processed]

14:Stewart E-5 (1936-1938)1944 NR13 Northern Paiute NR13
Washo NT20
Yurok N531
Comanche N06

Bois (p. 6) and Nash (p. 414) both tell of Frank Spencer (Wenceyuga), who conducted Ghost Dances in 1870 among the Washo, Paiute of Surprise Valley, at Klamath Reservation, and at McDermitt. Knowing that Basin Indians paid shamans well and that Spencer became a famous shaman at McDermitt, I do not doubt that he received something more than glory for his trouble. This is supported by Nash's statement (p. 424) concerning the 1870 movement at Klamath: "The appeal to the leaders—personal aggrandizement of previously declassed individuals—should not be overlooked."

The Shasta Indian who introduced the Earth Lodge variant of the 1870 Ghost Dance to the Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations and attempted to get a following among the Columbia River tribes "made quite a lot of money" by selling eagle-tail feathers at $1.00 apiece, headbands for $1.25, and by imposing fines of twenty-five cents for dropping a feather. He was given "three or four horses," also. Another convert, who took the dance to Coos Bay and charged one dollar for attendance, told Du Bois (p. 34): ". . . Cheteo Charlie and I divided the money. . . ." A contemporary newspaper account said of the Yurok Ghost Dance leader, "In his character of prophet he exacted a levy of half a dollar from each Indian permitted to join."[26] A Wintun invited the Achomawi to a dance with the instruction to bring all their valuables to pay for it.[27] And Du Bois's Chico Maidu informant said, "The River Patwin had wagons and were well-to-do, so they were called to Chico. The Hill Maidu were poor and had to come on foot, so they weren't asked often."

Homaldo (Mexican Jo), one of the Wintun creators of the Bole-Maru, the central California phase of the 1870 Ghost Dance, demanded twenty dollars for holding a meeting and said if it was not paid the rancheria captains "would have bad luck and die." Because Homaldo used sleight-of-hand tricks and had a white man partner, Du Bois (pp. 63–66) writes: ". . . his integrity, if not his influence, is suspect." She did not suspect Paitla, who proselyted western Oregon and the Shasta, Wintun, and Achomawi, although he often accompanied Homaldo and "told people to pay him money so they could be saved."

Except for Homaldo, Du Bois does not consider important the factor of individual financial advantage to the missionaries and innovators in the spread of the 1870 Ghost Dance complex. With the evidence she presents, however, financial reward added to political and social prerogatives appears to have been a strong inducement for converts to carry the religion beyond the confines of their own tribes.

Similar instances are found in the history of the 1890 Ghost Dance. Even the Northern Paiute (Paviotso) Wovoka, who at first seemed to be an unselfish, naïve dreamer, succumbed to the desire for material gain. Steward was told by the Owens Valley Paiute that Wovoka, "losing influence in California and Nevada . . . visited Oklahoma, charging people one dollar to shake hands and dividing the profits with a young boy" (p. 322). Shimkin heard that Wovoka when returning from a tour of the Plains visited Wind River, Wyoming, and charged from ten cents to ten dollars, according to ability to pay, for the same privilege.

The history of the 1890 Ghost Dance, as recorded by Mooney, is primarily one of the successes of outstanding leaders and proselyters.[28] The Arapaho Sitting Bull was the principal Arapaho leader and was probably personally responsible for the spread of the Ghost Dance to the Ponca, Oto, Missouri, Kansa, Iowa, Osage,

[26] Du Bois, 23, 27.
[27] Tom Garth, field notes.
[28] One case was individual obstruction. Mooney said the Comanche did not take to the Ghost Dance because "Quannah Parker, their head chief, opposed the new doctrine and prevented its spread among his tribe."